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# The Voyage of the Virginia

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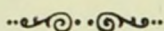
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## The Voyage of the *Virginia*

It was April 21, 1823. A motley crowd had gathered on the Saint Louis levee. Squalid Indians intermingled with roughly clad immigrants, levee loungers, lead miners, and fur traders. A sprinkling of soldiers and officials added color to the general confusion and bustle. All eyes were centered on the steamboat *Virginia* which lay at the levee with steam in her boilers, preparing to carry government supplies to the posts on the Upper Mississippi.

Built at Wheeling, Virginia, in 1819, the *Virginia* was a small stern-wheeler of 109.32 tons, and was owned by Redick McKee, James Pemberton, and seven others. She was 118 feet long, 18 feet 10 inches beam, and her depth was 5 feet 2 inches. She had a small cabin on deck but no pilot house, being guided by a tiller at the stern. James Pemberton acted as master occasionally



and John Crawford seems to have held the position of captain officially.

Among the passengers aboard the boat was Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian Agent at Fort St. Anthony which was renamed Fort Snelling in 1824. Taliaferro superintended the movement of supplies on the *Virginia*. He no doubt imparted a great deal of information about the trip to Giacomo Constantine Beltrami, the Italian exile and explorer, who was the sole chronicler of the events of the journey. Another passenger was Great Eagle, a Sauk Indian chief, whom William Clark had prevailed upon to board the *Virginia* while his less fortunate tribesmen made their way along the banks. A Kentucky family bound for the lead mines at Galena was on board "with their arms and baggage, cats and dogs, hens and turkeys; the children too had their own stock." A woman missionary bound for the lead mines to work among the Indians completed the list of known passengers.

Finally all was in readiness and the last passenger had hastily scrambled aboard. Amid cries of farewell and the good wishes of those gathered on the levee to see her off, the *Virginia* swung gracefully out into the channel on an "enterprise of the boldest, of the most extraordinary nature; and probably unparalleled." Many



skeptics shook their heads, doubtful of the practicability of steamboats crossing the rapids of the Mississippi. For days after the departure of the boat "there was great speculation as to whether the steamboat would ever return".

The current of the Mississippi seemed to grow swifter as the *Virginia* entered the Chain of Rocks channel a few miles above Saint Louis. "We were approaching the mouth of the Missouri, which is only eighteen miles from that town", Beltrami remarked, "and notwithstanding the power of our steamboat, we did not come in sight of this river before eight o'clock the following morning." The ease with which the *Virginia* passed the mouth of the Missouri was attributed to the presence of an island which obstructed the flow of that mighty stream, thereby breaking the pressure of its enormous volume.

Sixteen miles above the mouth of the Missouri a series of towering bluffs attracted the attention of the venturesome Italian. "The eastern bank of the Mississippi, opposite the village called *Portage des Sioux*, leading from the Illinois to the Missouri," he noted, "rises in abrupt rocks, hewn by nature into perpendicular pillars." Piasa Bluff gave him an illusion of viewing the palaces of Pompeii and Domitian on Lake Albano.

A few miles above the mouth of the Illinois, the



*Virginia* entered the great bend of the Mississippi. Leaving picturesque *Cap au Gris* rock behind, she churned on past Clarksville to Louisiana, "two pretty rising villages" on the Missouri shore, the latter being about a hundred miles from Saint Louis. With the exception of the forts along the way, Louisiana was the "last vestige of civilization" before Prairie du Chien was reached.

Beltrami designated the woodland region about present-day Quincy, Illinois, as the *Prairie des Liards* because of the extensive growth of poplar and cottonwood. He was amazed by the thick masses of trees which covered the islands and flood plains and stretched as far as the eye could see to the low-lying hills beyond. It would be a bad country to get lost in, he thought.

One day while the *Virginia* was wooding up, Beltrami ventured alone into the forest. A flock of wild turkeys eluded his pursuit and he continued his walk, soliloquizing on the beauty of the plant and animal life about him. Suddenly realizing that considerable time had elapsed, he hurried back to the river only to find the boat gone. Panic-stricken, he discharged his gun frantically, hoping to attract attention. The echoes resounded vainly in the great forest. Fortunately the *Virginia* struck a sand bar and Beltrami's absence was discovered. A canoe was sent to



rescue him and he was brought back, completely exhausted from his mad rush through the heavy underbrush along the muddy bank in pursuit of the boat.

When Beltrami returned to the *Virginia* he found that Great Eagle and the pilot had quarreled because the Indian had recommended taking a certain channel while the pilot insisted on taking another. When the boat struck the sand bar Great Eagle was so vexed that without further ado he plunged into the stream, swam ashore, and joined his fellow tribesmen who were making their way along the bank. This event probably occurred in the "Channel of the Foxes" a short distance below Fort Edwards.

The following day the *Virginia* arrived at Fort Edwards, where Great Eagle was found surrounded by members of his tribe. They had arrived before the *Virginia*, had set up a temporary encampment, and "were exchanging furs with the traders of the South-west Company." Great Eagle came aboard to get his bow, quiver, and gun. He was still exasperated with the officers of the boat but greeted Beltrami warmly. The latter, coveting the scalp of a Sioux chief that Great Eagle carried "suspended by the hair to the handle of his tomahawk", took advantage of this favorable moment to inveigle the much prized



trophy from him. Upon visiting the Sauk lodges, Beltrami was struck by the perfect equality exhibited by the Indians, even their dogs, their young bears and otters being treated as a part of the community.

Beltrami carefully observed the position of the fort, "built upon a promontory on the eastern bank of the Mississippi; its situation, which is very pleasant, commands a great extent of the river and the surrounding country, as well as the mouth of the river Le Moine [Des Moines] which descends from the west and is navigable for three hundred miles into the interior. The banks of this river are inhabited by the Yawohas [Iowas], a savage people, who have been almost entirely destroyed by the Sioux." At the time of the voyage of the *Virginia* the land west of the Mississippi and north of the Missouri boundary line was "distinguished only under the name of *Savage Lands*". No other traces of civilization existed in what is now Iowa and Minnesota than a few scattered huts belonging to half-breed traders.

After being pleasantly entertained by the officers of the garrison, the visitors boarded the *Virginia* and continued on their journey to the foot of the Des Moines or Lower Rapids, a hitherto impassable barrier for steamboats. In 1820 the steamboat *Western Engineer* had proceeded to



this point, but the sturdy conqueror of the Missouri did not dare venture farther. Indeed, she had repeatedly grounded in the channel below Fort Edwards and only returned to Saint Louis with the greatest difficulty.

In spite of an excellent stage of water, the *Virginia* proceeded cautiously, since the sharp jutting rock would crush the hull of the stoutest steamboat. For nine miles the perilous ascent continued, until the boat succeeded in squirming her way up to the "Middle of the Rapids of the Moine". There she was forced to return, her heavy load and draught being too great to effect the passage, and it was only by sheer good luck that the vessel escaped a rock and was saved from being dashed to pieces. Fortunately the damage was slight. Two days later, with a considerably lightened cargo, the *Virginia* succeeded in reaching the head of the rapids, where a party of Sauk Indians was encamped on the east bank of the river, near the present site of Nauvoo, Illinois.

Nine miles farther upstream the ruins of old Fort Madison on the west bank drew Beltrami's attention. It had been established in 1808 as an entrepôt for the Indian trade of that region. The government had abandoned its factory system in 1822, thus leaving the field open to the "South West Company" which, together with a rival



organization, monopolized the commerce of almost the whole savage region.

A short distance above Fort Madison the *Virginia* glided by the mouth of the "Bete Puante" or Skunk River. The Indian name for the precipitous "Yellow Hills" on the east bank of the river is perpetuated in the town of Oquawka, Illinois. Not far above the yellow banks, on the west side, the mouth of the "Yahowas" or Iowa River came in view. From this point on the beauty of the Mississippi held Beltrami spellbound. "Wooded islands, disposed in beautiful order by the hand of nature, continually varied the picture: the course of the river, which had become calm and smooth, reflected the dazzling rays of the sun like glass; smiling hills formed a delightful contrast with the immense prairies, which are like oceans, and the monotony of which is relieved by isolated clusters of thick and massy trees."

Leaving the Grande Prairie Mascotin in her wake, the *Virginia* rounded a bend in the river just in time for Beltrami to gain a "distant and exquisitely blended view" of Rock Island. Fort Armstrong stood at the foot of this island on a plateau about fifty feet above the level of the river. The eastern bank of the Mississippi above the mouth of Rock River was lined with an encampment of Fox Indians, allies of the Sauks, and re-



sembling them in features, dress, weapons, customs, and language. On the western shore of the Mississippi, "a semicircular hill, clothed with trees and underwood," enclosed a fertile spot carefully cultivated into fields and kitchen gardens. The fort saluted with four discharges of cannon, and the Indians paid the same compliment with their muskets.

While the *Virginia* lay at Fort Armstrong and prepared for the ascent of the Upper Rapids, Beltrami paid a visit to the great Indian village of Saukenuk. Situated about three miles to the southeast on the north bank of the Rock River, Saukenuk was the largest encampment of the Sauk tribe in the Mississippi Valley.

Beltrami was astonished at the skill exhibited by the youthful Sauks with their bows and arrows. They almost exhausted his supply of coins by hitting with ease small pieces twenty-five paces distant. To prevent the utter depletion of his purse he was forced to remove these costly targets to a distance of thirty-five paces. Smoked bear and highly flavored roots served as welcome refreshments during this sport.

The Sauks had never heard of any people other than the French, English, Spaniards, and Americans. They were surprised to learn that Beltrami was of a different nationality. Their aston-

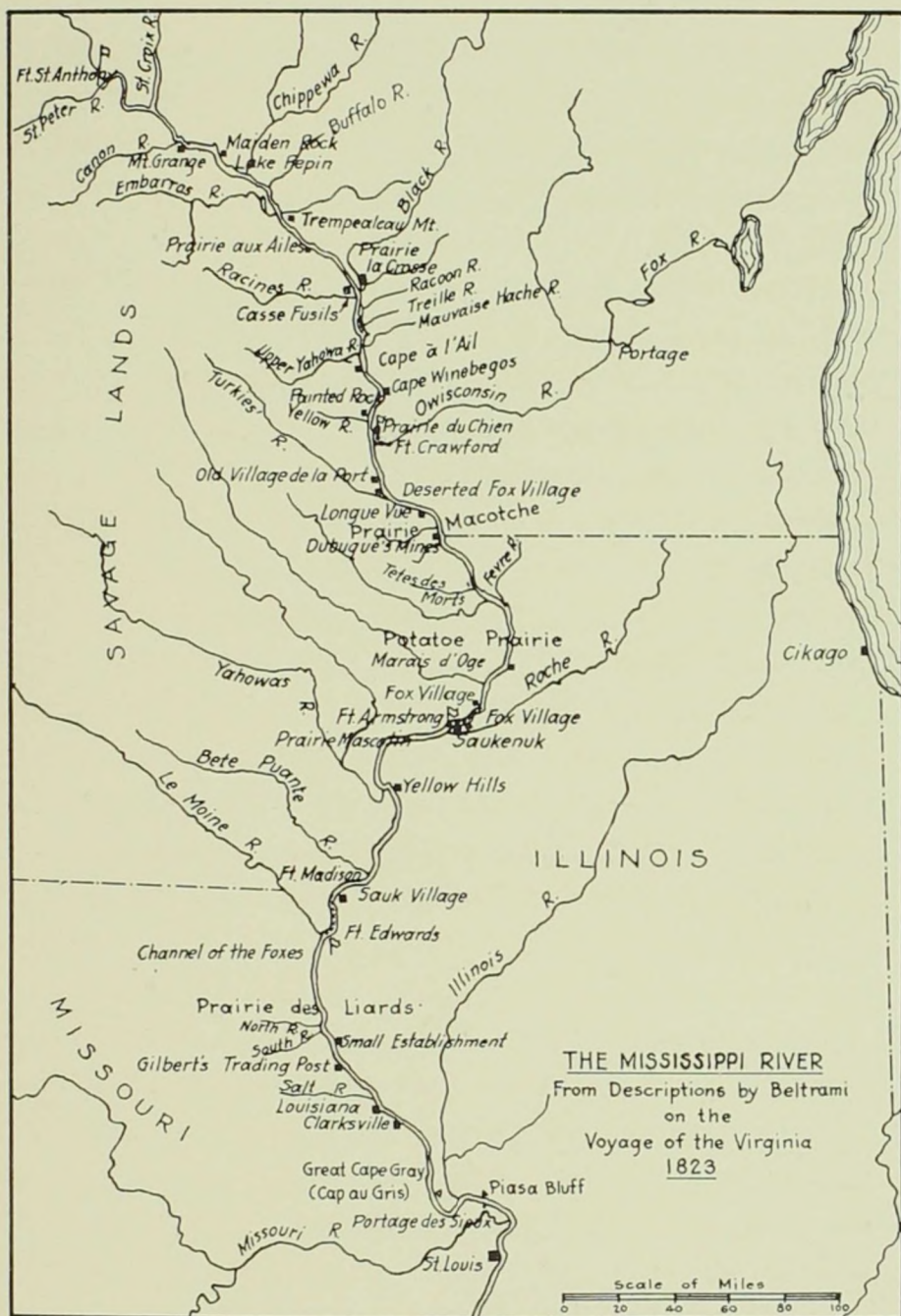


ishment turned to veneration when he told them he had come from the moon, but when the wily Italian attempted to gain a "clandestine entrance" to the medicine dance he was promptly ejected. Nor did his terrestrial homeland enable him to secure a medicine bag until he had made a present of "good whiskey" both to the person who gave it to him and to the high-priest whose sanction was necessary to secure it.

The following day, with the assistance of Colonel George Davenport and his "patroon debuts" or steersman, the *Virginia* began the ascent of the Rock Island or Upper Rapids, which Beltrami observed were longer and swifter than the Des Moines or Lower Rapids. Suddenly the boat struck a rock and stuck fast. Every hand was instantly at work endeavoring to free the helpless craft. The fact that the river had been rising for two days helped the boat, which Beltrami believed would otherwise have remained "nailed" fast.

The crew of the *Virginia* was entirely exhausted by the labor involved in getting the boat over the rapids and the captain held her over for a few hours near the present site of Le Claire, Iowa, in order to give the men an opportunity to recover from their fatigue. Beltrami went ashore and succeeded in shooting a large rattlesnake







with which he returned in triumph to his fellow travellers.

Six miles above the rapids the *Virginia* passed a village of Foxes on the west bank of the river. A little higher up she passed the Wapsipinicon River flowing into the Mississippi from the west and the "Marais d'Oge" or Marais d'Osier Slough on the east bank. Steaming on past the present site of Clinton, Beltrami observed the "Potatoe Prairie" on the west side known to-day as Pomme de Terre Prairie. Higher up, after passing the rivers *la Pomme* and *la Garde* which ran westward, he "saw a place called the Death's-heads; a field of battle where the Foxes defeated the Kikassias [Kaskaskia], whose heads they fixed upon poles as trophies of their victory." This was at Tetes des Morts Creek, which empties into the Mississippi at the northern boundary of Jackson County.

The *Virginia* stopped at the mouth of the Fever River, now known as the Galena, and Beltrami considered its name "in perfect conformity with the effect of the bad air which prevails there." The family from Kentucky and the woman missionary debarked, while the other passengers spent a few hours visiting the lead mines.

Twelve miles above the mouth of the Galena River the lead mines of Dubuque came into view.



The Italian visitor was again obliged to resort to the use of "all-powerful whiskey" to obtain permission to see the mines. He found that the Indians were carrying on just enough mining to satisfy their needs in trade. They melted the lead into holes dug in the rock and reduced it to pigs in this manner. It was then carried across the river, for they would permit no white man to come to the mines to get lead. Despite these precautions Beltrami considered the mines so valuable and the Americans so enterprising that he doubted whether the Indians would long retain possession of them. His canny forecast was realized exactly a decade later.

Leaving the mines of Dubuque, the *Virginia* wound her way through a country of ever increasing beauty. Beltrami's pen was "struck motionless" as for forty miles the variety of scenes and objects solicited his attention and excited his astonishment. Rude and unkempt in its pristine grandeur, Eagle Point opened the way to "Prairie Macotche" as Beltrami labelled present-day Maquoketa Chute. At length a place which he felt might appropriately be called *Longue Vue* [Buena Vista?], elicited the following description: "Twelve small isolated mountains present themselves in defile, and project one behind another, like side-scenes. They are intersected by



small valleys; each has its rivulet, which divides it, and reflects from its limpid streams the beauty of the trees by which its banks are adorned. These hills exhibit a mixture of the gloomy and the gay, while those which appear at the back of the scene are veiled with magical effect in the transparent mist of the horizon. On the eastern bank a verdant meadow rises with gentle slope to a distant prospect, formed and bounded by a small chain of abrupt mountains. Little islands, studded with clumps of trees, among which the steamboat was winding its course, appeared like the most enchanting gardens."

A deserted Fox village was seen on the banks of the Turkey River. Eight miles farther up, the *Virginia* passed the "Old Village de la Port" where Guttenberg now stands. There the pretended territorial jurisdiction of the Foxes was said to terminate, but these savage warriors often hunted beyond their domain, thus continually precipitating bloody wars with the Sioux.

The importance of the Wisconsin River as a highway for the fur trader was noted as the *Virginia* passed the confluence of that stream with the Mississippi. Six miles above this point the boat hove in sight of Prairie du Chien. She had travelled almost five hundred miles and this little French settlement was the only village to present



any of the earmarks of civilization. South of the village stood a "wretched wooden fort, named fort Crawford".

The passengers lost no time in poking about the interesting French settlement. Some "gloomy and ferocious" Winnebago Indians caught Beltrami's eye but he refused to shake hands with "Mai-Pock" upon learning that he had regaled his friends with human flesh. This was "an expression of contempt the most severe and humiliating an Indian" could receive. The industrious and friendly Menominee were commended for their refusal to join the English in the War of 1812.

Bidding farewell to Prairie du Chien, where Joseph Rolette had politely entertained them, the voyagers began the last lap of the long journey to the northernmost military post on the Upper Mississippi. An uncharted channel fully two hundred miles in extent remained to be traversed before Captain Crawford could discharge the last of his cargo, and once more turn the bow of his gallant little craft downstream.

About six miles from Prairie du Chien, near the mouth of the Yellow River, stood a rock which was painted red and yellow every year and which the Indians looked upon with veneration. The Mississippi at this point presented scenes of pe-



culiar novelty. "The hills disappear, the number of islands increases, the waters divide into various branches, and the bed of the river in some places extends to a breadth of nearly three miles, which is greater by one half than at St. Louis; and, what is very remarkable, its depth is not diminished".

Conspicuous landmarks were noted as the *Virginia* threaded this network of channels. At the foot of Winneshiek Slough a mighty rampart called "Cape Winebegos" still stands guard over what is now Lynxville, Wisconsin. Cone-shaped Capoli Bluff, a few miles below present-day Lansing, was described as Cape a l'Ail Sauvage. The whole region is known to-day as the Winneshiek Bottoms and forms an important section of the Upper Mississippi Wild Life Refuge.

The *Virginia* usually stopped at dusk as it would have been foolhardy to proceed in an unknown channel, hitherto unnavigated by a steamboat. But one evening as they were about to tie up for the night it was found possible to go on, for suddenly the entire river was illuminated by the distant glow of a gigantic forest fire.

"It was perfectly dark, and we were at the mouth of the river Yahowa [Upper Iowa]", wrote Beltrami, "when we saw at a great distance all the combined images of the infernal regions in full perfection. . . . The venerable trees of



these eternal forests were on fire, which had communicated to the grass and brushwood, and these had been borne by a violent north-west wind to the adjacent plains and valleys. The flames towering above the tops of the hills and mountains, where the wind raged with most violence, gave them the appearance of volcanoes, at the moment of their most terrific eruptions; and the fire winding in its descent through places covered with grass, exhibited an exact resemblance of the undulating lava of Vesuvius or *Ætna*. . . . This fire accompanied us with some variations for fifteen miles. . . . Showers of large sparks, which fell upon us, excited terror in some, and laughter in others. I do not believe that I shall ever again witness such astonishing contrasts of light and darkness, of the pathetic and the comic, the formidable and the amusing, the wonderful and the grotesque."

The *Virginia* travelled all night by the aid of this superb torch. During the night she passed the Bad Axe and Raccoon rivers but at dawn the tired craft ran aground "by way of resting herself".

A few miles above the river *aux Racines* (Root), Beltrami noticed a place called "Casse-Fusils" (broken muskets) from the fact that a party of Indians, jealous of another band armed



with English guns, attacked them and broke their muskets. This incident probably occurred opposite the present site of LaCrosse, Wisconsin, near a point now known as Broken Arrow Slough.

Puffing resolutely on past the mouth of the Black River, the *Virginia* entered the beautiful and romantic country around the present site of Winona. The majestic bluffs were likened to those on the Rhine between Bingen and Koblenz. All Beltrami's powers of expression were exhausted by mighty Trempealeau, the mountain that walks in the water. "Amid a number of delightful little islands, encircled by the river, rises a mountain of conical form equally isolated. You climb amid cedars and cypresses, strikingly contrasted with the rocks which intersect them, and from the summit you command a view of valleys, prairies, and distances in which the eye loses itself. From this point I saw both the last and the first rays of a splendid sun gild the lovely picture. The western bank presents another illusion to the eye. Mountains, ruggedly broken into abrupt rocks, which appear cut perpendicularly into towers, steeples, cottages, &c., appear precisely like towns and villages."

A Sioux Indian encampment was observed at "*la Prairie aux Ailes*" (Winona) and the *Virginia* landed. Wrapped in a wretched buffalo



skin, Chief Wabasha came on board followed by a motley array of warriors. Major Taliaferro greeted Wabasha with "plenty of shakes by the hand," and smoked the calumet of peace while Beltrami acted as "ape" to this "troop of comedians". Wabasha was greatly impressed with the construction and performance of the *Virginia*. The intricacy of the engine especially appealed to him. When members of the Stephen H. Long expedition passed his village in keel boats a short time later he expressed deep interest in the *Virginia* and was particularly curious about the construction of the engine and the principle on which it worked.

Leaving Chief Wabasha behind, the *Virginia* entered a section of the Mississippi that was "diversified by hills, plains, meadows, and forests." The Buffalo and Chippewa rivers were seen flowing into the Mississippi from the east. Below modern Wabasha the Embarras or Zumbro River drained a region called the Great Encampment.

Just above the mouth of the Chippewa, the *Virginia* entered an "elliptical amphitheatre" encircled by little hills known as Lake Pepin. Varying from one to three miles in width throughout its course of twenty-two miles, Lake Pepin is so deep that boats have no difficulty in navigating



it even during seasons of low water. In stormy weather its waters are lashed into a fury and steamboats seldom venture upon it. As the *Virginia* was plowing her way through, a terrific squall struck the lake and it was only by means of superb navigation on the part of Captain Crawford that she was able to wallow her way to safety. Staring Indians, transfixed with astonishment upon the bank, were the only spectators of this thrilling and almost fatal incident.

On the eastern shore near the head of Lake Pepin towers romantic Maiden Rock. Another Sioux village hove in sight at the Mountain of the Grange, now known as Barn Bluff at Red Wing. Here again the chief and his leading warriors came on board. After the travelers solemnly smoked the peace pipe and gave ear to some long and woefully dull speeches, the *Virginia* continued upstream. Above the mouth of the Cannon River the Mississippi became narrower and less studded with islands while the bluffs were steeper and more imposing. All on board must have experienced a thrill as they passed the St. Croix River and realized that the long journey was almost at an end. Medicine Wood, Pine Bend, and Little Crow's Village at the Grand Marais were soon left behind. While the *Virginia* was wooding up, the passengers were told



of a small valley of cedars, firs, and cypresses leading to a cavern named in honor of Jonathan Carver.

On May 10, 1823, the *Virginia* nosed her way into the St. Peter's or Minnesota River and came to a well-earned rest under the frowning cliffs upon which Fort St. Anthony was built. When the Indians saw the *Virginia* "cut its way without oars or sails against the current of the great river, some thought it a monster vomiting fire, others the dwelling of the Manitous, but all approached it with reverence or fear." When the tired boat began to blow off steam the frightened warriors "took to the woods, men, women, and children, with their blankets flying in the wind, some tumbling in the brush which entangled their feet as they ran away — some hallooing, some crying, to the great amusement of the people on board the steamboat."

The *Virginia* made the long journey of seven hundred miles in twenty days. She met with many delays. During the course of the journey she struck five sand bars, four below Prairie du Chien and one above. Approximately five days had been spent in getting over the Des Moines and the Rock Island rapids. Wood was burned for fuel and since none had been prepared in advance the *Virginia* had been forced to lay over



while fresh supplies were cut by the crew. Several days must have been lost in the process of wooding up. Moreover, with the exception of the night of the forest fire, the engines had stopped each day at sundown.

The voyage of the *Virginia* established the practicability of navigating the Upper Mississippi by steamboat. Later in the year she completed two more trips above the rapids, one to the mouth of the St. Peter's and another to Fort Crawford. After these trips the government did not hesitate to utilize a quicker and more reliable way of moving troops and supplies than had previously been used. With the advent of steam navigation it became evident that the Mississippi provided the most expeditious and natural outlet for the huge quantities of lead that were just beginning to be produced and were soon to reach enormous volumes. The river was to become also the main artery along which the great waves of immigration moved steadily northward into the Upper Mississippi Valley. No other means of transportation was capable of serving this region so well before the advent of the railroad.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN